

## Consensus

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Volume 33

Issue 2 *Theology and Context(s)*

Article 13

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11-25-2011

# Jesus in Context: Power, People and Performance

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### Recommended Citation

Cole-Arnal, Oscar (2011) "Jesus in Context: Power, People and Performance," *Consensus*: Vol. 33 : Iss. 2 , Article 13.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol33/iss2/13>

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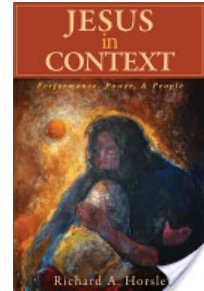
## Book Review

### **Jesus in Context: Power, People and Performance**

Richard A. Horsley

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008

In the many book reviews I have written over the years, I have found none as difficult to write as this one. As I reflect back on Horsley's *Jesus in Context* I react with a deep sense of ambivalence. I tend to read and review books that appeal to me; hence most of said reviews emerge as positive appraisals. The handful of clearly negative reviews tend to reflect books in my own field that demand my reading yet leave me disappointed. However, in the case of this latest book by the most prolific Richard Horsley I leaped into it with great interest but came away both strongly annoyed and exhilarated. My contradictory emotions are explained below.



*Annoyance:* In order to concentrate on the main contributions of the work as well as end on an upbeat note, I choose to give my negative impressions at the outset. I found the book constantly, even maddeningly, repetitive with the author's insights repeated time and time again, even to the point of phraseology and mention of scholars who have influenced him in his work (Werner Kelber and James C. Scott being two examples). Again and yet again I would read that scrolls were costly and cumbersome, to the point I wanted to cry out "Enough already!" What made this annoyance so especially painful was my conviction that Horsley's major points stand the test of scholarship and lead us forward in the discipline of Early Christianity. On top of his convincing argumentation (however repetitive) I am an outspoken proponent of his earlier works, both individual and collaborative. Every other effort I have read by Horsley has left me both challenged and inspired. I have seen him in action at academic conferences and he comes across as a gentle and engaging scholar and a team player respected by scholars young and old. Include this reviewer as one who has benefited immensely from his corpus.

*Exhilaration:* Now that I have vented my frustration, I turn to the very positive aspects of *Jesus in Context*. His critique of historical Jesus scholarship as being anachronistically committed to a print-oriented society stands the test. He crafts a convincing apologia of the dominance of the oral culture found within a peasant, agrarian, grass-roots movement without lapsing into standard mode of argued or implied literacy as characteristic of the Jesus Movement(s). In detail he undermines historical "essentialist" notions of both Judaism and Christianity, underscoring the conflict between two competing Israelite traditions, the "hidden" versus the dominant. His methodological points are mapped out clearly, and he puts these to the test quite convincingly with regard to Jesus, Q and Mark.

Although I am almost totally convinced by his argumentation, the one question I felt left unanswered was “why and how Q went from Aramaic to Greek, with the Greek appearing in written form (probably before the Gospels of Matthew and Luke)?” Please forgive what might be construed as personal, but I think William Arnal’s *Jesus and the Village Scribes* offers a distinct possibility, namely that such transmitters were lower level village scribes inclined more toward oppressed grass-roots peasants as opposed to the elites they were expected to represent.

I do apologize, at least somewhat, for my annoyance for Horsley did, after all, mention in his introductory chapter that the book consisted of thematic chapters that could be lifted from the body of the book and used by combining his methodological appeals with the particular topic of the chapter. Toward that purpose the author has succeeded masterfully. And part of me wondered if, just perhaps, Richard Horsley may have been engaging in his own form of “oral performance” repetition in a printed medium to give academic readers such as me a taste of how oral tradition works. To be sure, I remember his major points with clarity. So, in spite of some frustration, I commend this latest gift and challenge from one of the giants in the field.

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